A hotel catering for stars and statesmen

By NICHOLAS WYMAN

SEVERAL years ago I was given a book titled 'The London Ritz Book of Afternoon Tea' as a Christmas gift. This sparked my initial interest in the Ritz Hotel and led me to apply for a job.

My first introduction to the hotel was a steep climb up an iron spiral staircase, barely 60 centimetres wide, to reach the personnel department. I was introduced to the chef des cuisines, Keith Stanley, who is following in the long tradition of English chefs at the Ritz. He told me that his kitchens must still serve a style of classical cuisine as well as creative food to lure both new clientele and food connoisseurs.

I was taken on an orientation tour and was not disappointed. The images I had conjured up of luxury, elegance, style and a tradition of top service were all there in beautiful surroundings!

The history of the Ritz is impressive and just walking around the hotel is a current reminder of guests of the past. I was shown the suite where Eisenhower, de Gaulle and Churchill met during World War II. This is where the Aga Khan had an apartment for many years and was often seen with Mahatma Gandhi in the Palm Court. I was then proudly shown the balcony from where Charlie Chaplin threw carnations to a cheering crowd below.

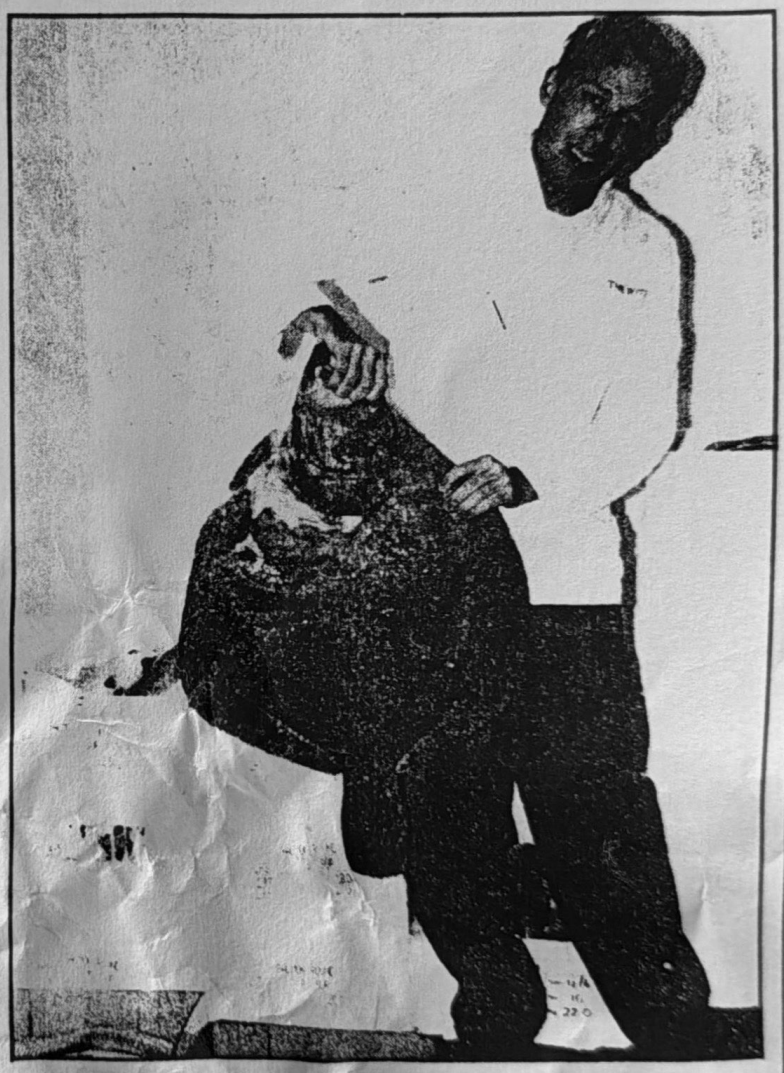
The following day I started work as a demi chef de partie. The staff regard afternoon tea at the Ritz as a delightful experience for all who partake of it. It is served in the Palm Court with the guests seated on Louis XIV chairs at marble tables. The Palm Court has a frosted glass ceiling with pink-topped chandeliers which throw a rosy glow over the proceedings. Many of the women still wear hats and the gentlemen suits.

The tea itself consists of crustless finger sandwiches, both brown and white, of all varieties. The favorites being the cucumber, cream cheese and chives, egg mayonnaise and the smoked-salmon sandwiches. These are followed by the scones with jam and cream and then french pastries and other such delights that are all baked just before they reach the customer. The demand is so great that there are two sittings and bookings need to be made weeks in advance.

For a small fortune you can use the 20-piece Nanking china that the hotel bought at auction in 1986. The china was recovered only a few years before from a wrecked merchant ship, sunk off the coast of Java in 1753. I was shown the rubber-lined sink where these prized plates are washed. When I asked the question: Why is it so expensive to use the china? The answer: the outlay of $75,000.

The Ritz hosts "big band" dancing nights where the guests step back into the 1920s and dine and dance dressed for the period. One of my most enjoyable evenings was when I helped organise a function to celebrate 100 years of Agatha Christie. The hotel was transformed into the turn of the century, right down to guests arriving in vintage cars. I was introduced to John Suchet, alias Monsieur Poirot, who told me all about his dining adventures on the Orient Express.

After a few days of settling in I became a chef tournant to relieve in all the sections of the kitchen. Working in the larder and on sauces was stimulating but most of all I enjoyed working with fish. I soon found that the Ritz has a good training scheme where chefs are invited to visit London's suppliers and markets to learn more about the produce they use and where it comes from. I saw a lot of London at night and early morning when visiting the markets as most of the trading for the meat, poultry, fruit, vegetables and fish is done while the rest of London sleeps.



The author at the Billingsgate Market; checking the catch for the Ritz.

My favorite market is the Billingsgate Fish Market, the oldest of London's markets and the largest in the UK. It is located in the docklands area having moved from its original site on the River Thames in the heart of the city in 1982. Trading at Billingsgate goes as far back as the year 1327. Since the 16th Century it has been mainly a fish market.

We arrived at the market just before 5 am. Right on the hour Billingsgate was officially opened with the ringing of a bell. A new language then took over as the mongers started trading. The market floor became a hive of activity with anything from 500 porters feverishly pushing their trolleys of fish from the floor to waiting trucks and vans. A lot of business was conducted without sighting the goods as larger companies buy seven-metre containers. I was made to feel welcome by being offered samples of fish and shown the many varieties from all parts of the world. I even discovered fresh fish from Australia and New Zealand such as salmon and live eel.

One of the bigger fish is the turbot. It often appears on the Ritz menu as "fish of the day" served simply with escoffier garnish.

At the market I met one of the Ritz's suppliers, Cecil & Co. They buy most of their produce from the market but sometimes buy directly from the boats. Cecil supplies some of London's most prestigious restaurants and hotels and, although the business is quite large, they still offer "old-fashioned service". The manager of Cecil's invites chefs to send their apprentices and commis to work with his fishmongers "on the blocks" to gain skills in fishmongery. I spent a day at Cecil's being shown how the mongers assemble orders for the demanding customers; each chef having different needs.

On one week $100,000 worth of fish and crustaceans pass through this one supplier.

Personal visits to the markets to work with the merchants and help select the produce gave me an overall picture enhancing the final product served at the table. Nicholas Wyman is touring Europe as Australia's 1989 Apprentice of the Year.